

THE HUMAN BEHIND HUMAN RIGHTS

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It is nearly 25 years old, but the photo on the forged ID card still bears an unmistakable resemblance to the tall, lean University of Connecticut history professor who keeps it as a reminder. It is the handsome face of an African youth — too young, it would seem, to have seen so much death, to have spoken out against a brutal dictator, to have been hunted as an enemy of the state.

“This is what I used to escape the country,” Amii Omara-Otunnu says from his modest UConn office, his long, slender fingers holding the pink card that helped him flee Uganda and conceal his identity from Idi Amin’s secret police.

Like his degrees from Harvard and Oxford, the ID card symbolizes the kind of credentials Omara-Otunnu brings to his role as the leader of UConn’s push to enter the field of human rights education. His own harrowing escape, his family’s exile from Uganda, his uncle’s murder at the hands of Amin — all make human rights abuses more than just an abstraction for Omara-Otunnu.

Despite experiencing those abuses firsthand, the soft-spoken professor, a specialist in African history, displays an unshakeable optimism, an easygoing wit and a knack for bringing people together. He gets much of the credit for a widely praised partnership between UConn and the African National Congress, the political party that struggled to end apartheid in South Africa.

Last month, UNESCO — the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization — announced that he had been awarded the organization’s first U.S. chair in human rights, a position intended to promote human rights research and education.

“He’s the perfect choice,” said Donald Spivey, a University of Miami history professor and former colleague of Omara-Otunnu’s at UConn. “If he wasn’t doing this, he should have gone into the diplomatic corps and worked in areas of international crisis. He’s a born mediator.”

His natural intellect and compassion for others were nurtured during a childhood in a large, prominent, deeply religious family that put a premium on education. The fifth of 12 children, Omara-Otunnu attended a Catholic high school and came from a home in rural northern Uganda where he recalls learning a fundamental respect for people of all races and backgrounds.

“It originates essentially from my family, my father,” the 48-year-old professor says in a deep voice and an accent described as a combination of Oxford and East African. “My father had friends from all over the world — Europe, Africa, Asia. ... He treated them all equally well, regardless of their social background.”

His father, Yusto Otunnu, owned a transport business and was a Christian evangelist who in the '60s had traveled in Africa with Billy Graham. “My father emphasized to us we are all children of God,” Omara-Otunnu said. “Every day, that was drilled into our heads.”

It was a lesson the son learned well, said Ochoro Otunnu, Amii's younger brother, recalling a conversation that took place years ago in Uganda. Ochoro, about 15 or 16 at the time, had used the words “scum of the earth,” a phrase he remembered reading somewhere. Amii, who was already in college, took Ochoro aside. “He said, ‘Don't ever use that phrase again! Nobody is scum of the earth.’”

Omara-Otunnu learned his politics, too, from his family. His uncle, Anglican bishop Janani Luwum, issued a pastoral letter condemning Amin's human rights record. Omara-Otunnu's uncle and father met with Amin but were taken away separately. “That,” he says, “was the last time my father saw his brother.”

Omara-Otunnu knew the risks. An older brother, Olara, who later would work for the United Nations, already had fled Uganda. But as a student leader at Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda, Omara-Otunnu, too, condemned Amin's government. Once, after he and others spoke out in a place called Freedom Square, military police surrounded and chased the speakers and then attacked students in their dormitories.

“There was not a single person I knew who did not lose a friend, a brother, a father while Amin was in power. ... Everyone knew my position.”

Within hours after his uncle disappeared, Amin's police nearly caught up with Omara-Otunnu, too. It was Feb. 18, 1977, about 4:30 a.m., when the police showed up

looking for him. But they went to the wrong dormitory — a mistake he believes saved his life. Warned by another student, he dressed quickly and fled.

He found his way to a nearby girls' secondary school, where teachers hid him for a week and created the phony ID, using the name of one of the teachers. With the new identity, he made it to the border and slipped into Kenya. He keeps the ID as a reminder of his narrow escape, along with the shirt and trousers he pulled on hastily that night at his dormitory.

Soon after his escape, he left on a scholarship for Harvard University, where he earned a bachelor's degree in social studies, graduating with honors in three years. He won a fellowship to the London School of Economics and then went to Oxford, where he received a law degree and a Ph.D.

At Oxford, he played soccer, became the first black student body president of his graduate college, and continued his work with the anti-apartheid movement. It was also at Oxford where he met another graduate student, a young middle-class British woman, Elizabeth Munday, who was impressed by his idealism.

"He was quite unlike anyone I had ever met," she said. "He's an incredibly upright person. He's also a lot of fun and has a great sense of humor."

The two were married in 1985, and Omara-Otunnu was offered a job at the United Nations. Instead, he returned to Uganda in hopes of rebuilding the struggling country — a decision he later would call a mistake.

The nation was in the turmoil of a civil war, and Omara-Otunnu was forced to flee again. His briefcase was stolen from a hotel, and his missing passport turned up later alongside a dead body.

No one had heard from him, and back in England, "BBC reported I had been killed," he said. His wife, who was pregnant with the couple's first child, had heard the reports. "As far as we knew at that point, he was dead," she said.

Omara-Otunnu fled to Sudan and was able to get word back to his family. He was reunited with Elizabeth that spring, just days before the birth of their daughter, Larib.

The name means “someone who unites people.” She would be the first of two daughters. Six years later, Tekowa, whose name means “our strength,” was born.

After fleeing his homeland a second time, Omara-Otunnu sought political asylum in the United States, where he taught and did post-doctoral work at Harvard’s Center for International Affairs.

“It is a tragedy for him and for his homeland that he can not now be teaching” there, Harvard Professor Katherine Auspitz wrote to the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service in 1987, urging the INS to grant political asylum to her former student and friend.

“He would not exaggerate the danger he faces” in Uganda, she wrote. “I have known him for a decade; and I know him to be resolute, wise, and brave.”

The letter was an act of kindness from his former teacher at Harvard, a place where he also had felt the barbs of racism.

“I never realized how pernicious racism was until I was at Harvard,” he said. He recalled, for example, how some students, blacks and whites, questioned his friendship with a white classmate and how one of his professors wondered how he wrote English so well, questioning whether he had done the work himself.

Question of race continue to vex many in America, but Omara-Otunnu says, “The whole issue of race misses the point.” That perspective arises, perhaps, from his broad international background. It is rooted in his fundamental view of mankind.

“A short person is as human as a tall person, a white person is as human as a black person, a woman is as human as a man,” he said.

In 1988, after two years of post-doctoral work at Harvard, Omara-Otunnu accepted an offer from UConn and moved to its campus at Storrs. You could hardly find more unlikely partners than a public university in rural New England and a historic freedom movement in South Africa, but those who know Omara-Otunnu are not surprised that he was able to bring the two together.

“He’s the linchpin of everything that’s happening. ... Through his personality and dedication, he has gotten the university to respond,” said Scott Brohinsky, director of university communications at UConn and part of a delegation that traveled to South Africa to cement the partnership.

Naledi Pandor, a member of South Africa’s parliament and chairwoman of the National Council of Provinces, said it was not only Omara-Otunnu’s scholarly writings, but his activism at Harvard and Oxford that earned him the respect of the African National Congress. “He’s been known for a long time by people within the ANC due to his support for the struggle against apartheid,” she said.

When the brutal whites-only system of apartheid ended with all-race elections in 1994, Omara-Otunnu was fascinated that the new government established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Instead of seeking revenge, the new black-led government decided that the country could only come to terms with its past through the process of seeking public confessions from former police officers, guerrillas and others and granting amnesty to those who could prove their actions were influenced by the politics of the day.

“What they’re doing is the most ennobling experiment in humanity I have ever seen,” Omara-Otunnu said. “I think the struggle in South Africa was the defining struggle in the second half of the 20th century. ... For me, South Africa has become the epicenter of human rights.”

The UConn-ANC partnership makes UConn the U.S. archive for ANC documents, establishes an oral history program for key ANC figures and serves as a foundation for Omara-Otunnu’s UNESCO human rights activities, including research, seminars and undergraduate courses.

Omara-Otunnu’s role in establishing the partnership, of which he is executive director, was a key reason for his selection for the UNESCO human rights chair. The award, the only such chair in the United States, takes on added significance because the United States dropped out of UNESCO for political reasons in 1984, said Rudolf Jo0, a UNESCO representative who oversees the organization’s human rights chairs in about 40 countries.

“We are waiting with impatience and ready to see the return of the United States, and we think that this chair can help facilitate that,” Jo0 said.

In an afternoon class at UConn, Omara-Otunnu asks a young student whether she is thinking about class work or about her boyfriend. Then, his eyes dance, a smile creases his face — and the young woman knows he is teasing.

Moments later, he asks another student about the U.N.'s Universal Declaration of Human Rights and laughs, amused by the young man's succinct answer: "It's pretty cool."

The charm that makes him a strong ambassador for the university also serves Omara-Otunnu well in the classroom. It is there, working with young people, that human rights education can make a difference, he believes. As UConn joins the likes of Columbia University and American University in expanding human rights education, Omara-Otunnu is exactly the kind of scholar who gives the program credibility.

"You're talking about someone who has experienced the horror of massive abuses of human rights," said UConn senior Chris Hattayer, who is in one of Omara-Otunnu's history classes.

Omara-Otunnu wants his students to understand not only the horrors but the triumphs of the human character. Just as some tried to silence him in Uganda, others, like the teachers who forged his ID, stood up to help.

"Within us, there are forces of evil and good," he said.

The capacity for evil, of course, has been on the minds of Americans since Sept. 11. The attacks on New York and Washington make the need for human rights education even more urgent, Omara-Otunnu said recently at UConn.

"The history of human rights shows that governments, institutions and people have generally acted together — across national, ethnic and racial boundaries — only after calamitous human tragedies," he told hundreds of people at a human rights seminar at UConn last month.

"Whatever our skin color, our gender, or our economic status, and from whatever part of the world we come," he added, echoing a father's admonition from a distant past, "we are all human beings."